

Involving Males in Preventing Teen Pregnancy

A Guide for Program Planners

(Research Report)

Author(s): Freya L. Sonenstein, Kellie Stewart, Laura Duberstein Lindberg, Marta Pernas, Sean Williams

Published: December 01, 1997

The nonpartisan Urban Institute publishes studies, reports, and books on timely topics worthy of public consideration. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, Inc.

**Interview with Ernest McMillan, Executive Director and Founder
Houston, TX**

Philosophy

Ernest McMillan, *Fifth Ward Enrichment Program (FWEP)* Director, wants the young men living in the Fifth Ward in Houston, TX, to understand that "though they may live in the ghetto, the ghetto does not live in them." McMillan believes that the ghetto environment, with its lack of stability and positive influence, leads to apathy among its young people and a confusion of values. In order to bring the males of the Fifth Ward direction and empowerment, McMillan heads *FWEP*, which he hopes will help young men grow into responsible and contributing adults. He attempts to help participants redirect their energies into positive goals for the future rather than falling into the destructive path taken by many youth in the ghetto. Participants are taught to value education, delay gratification, view life as sacred, and set responsible priorities. Males acquire social and leadership skills through male role models, mentoring techniques, academic support, and therapeutic activities. In addition, they learn the importance of respect and communication in their relationships with women.

Ernest McMillan, *Fifth Ward Enrichment Program* Director, wants the young men living in the Fifth Ward in Houston, Texas, to understand that "though they may live in the ghetto, the ghetto does not live in them."

History

In June 1984, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health awarded Community Partners, a non-profit health care and social service organization in the Fifth Ward, funding for a pilot project. The total budget for the first year was \$25,000, which funded activities, transportation, and education materials for about 40 middle school boys. The project was run out of a small building next to a middle school from which the target population was drawn. *FWEP* was initiated by two full-time staff with the goal of encouraging males to remain in school. Since 1984, *FWEP* has grown to serve about 200 young men per year in two elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. With its expansion, the program became an independent agency in June 1996 and has moved to a centrally located community center.

The Program

FWEP provides a wide array of workshops and activities after school and on weekends during the school year. Staff facilitate life skills classes and small group counseling sessions which cover *FWEP*'s own *Heros and Legacies* curriculum as well as other topics. These workshops address issues such as dating and communication, contraception, human growth and sexuality, self awareness, conflict resolution, career planning, and drug and alcohol use. Frequently, the program also hosts in-service workshops. One such workshop is the "Women Speak, Men Listen" panel in which a group of women, including single, working mothers, speak to young men from their own perspectives about the challenges of being a woman. In addition to group work, *FWEP* addresses the young men on a more personal level as well, providing academic tutoring, individual counseling, and small group support sessions.

FWEP incorporates a variety of activities to allow participants the opportunity for personal growth in several areas. Young men are active in field trips, community service, drama, chess, arts, camping, and competitive sports. To foster empowerment, *FWEP* facilitates four leadership skills retreats per year through which males build skills to become peaceful leaders in their schools and communities. McMillan stresses the importance of taking the young men out of their neighborhood environment to help them gain a different perspective. He likes to take the young men to a nearby campground, such as the Prairie View University campground or the YMCA camp. At these retreats, young men do group exercises that involve team work, such as ropes courses, and they are given an opportunity to work and communicate with young men with whom they would not normally associate.

Academic achievement is a strong focus of *FWEP*. *FWEP* awards good school attendance and academic improvement with points that can be redeemed for merchandise at the H.P. Carter Middle School store, which operates once per month. The store sells a variety of items including pencils, T-shirts, and radios. The program hopes that the buying power of the points will teach young men the benefits of delayed gratification. Rather than redeeming their points immediately, participants can save them up to buy something of greater value. In

addition, *FWEP* sponsors academic clubs that incorporate competition through culturally relevant spelling bees and creative writing projects that involve Latino and African-American themes. Teens can also participate in non-academic clubs. For example, participants in the Teen Enterprise Group engage in after-school work such as computer repair and community gardening.

In addition to its close work with the school system, *FWEP* collaborates with local law enforcement, health providers, and church organizations. Recognizing the multiple needs of young men, the program often refers participants to neighborhood resources, such as community teen clinics and outpatient drug and alcohol support groups.

Summer Activities

FWEP offers summer activities to keep its participants off the streets and involved in enriching experiences while they are not in school. The summer program includes paid employment in the community; participants receive a stipend of \$10 per day for doing such work as mowing lawns, setting up burglar bars, and moving furniture at schools. Older boys, ages 15 to 17, are engaged in teen enterprise projects that operate businesses such as bike repair, computer repair, silk-screen printing, filmmaking, and urban gardening. Life skills classes similar to those offered during the school year are also incorporated. The summer program welcomes males from communities surrounding the Fifth Ward; 20 percent of summer program participants come from outside communities. McMillan believes that summer programming helps keep the young men on the right track.

Participants

The Fifth Ward, where *FWEP* is housed, is one of Houston's most economically distressed neighborhoods. According to McMillan, the Fifth Ward is greatly affected by several urban problems such as gang violence, drug abuse, high teen pregnancy rates, school drop-out, and crime. A high proportion of youth are raised in low-income, single parent households. To combat these problems and provide guidance and positive role modeling, *FWEP* serves young men between the ages of 10 and 17, about 85 percent of whom are African-American and 15 percent Latino. McMillan states that 5 percent of the participants are fathers.

FWEP participants are mostly referred to the program by teachers and school administrators. The program staff establishes ongoing communication with the participants' teachers in order to work together in assessing the students' progress. In addition to those referred by the school, 10 percent of participants are court mandated to attend the program.

FWEP works with young men from four target schools who are ages 10 to 17. McMillan tries to involve males who are engaged in negative activities such as drugs and risky sexual acts, or who have dropped out of school. On the other hand, McMillan also seeks to involve young men who have distinguished reputations in the neighborhood as peacemakers. In all cases, the program tries to set males on the right track by showing them positive pathways for development.

Participants are typically involved with *FWEP* for three years. Many, however, choose to stay in the program from the fourth grade until high school. The program participants need to attend the program at least three times per week. Participants have the option of attending recreational activities after attending a minimum single counseling session each week.

Parental Involvement

McMillan believes that *FWEP* could not be successful without parent involvement. To this end, *FWEP* makes a great effort to inform parents of current activities. Periodically, the program sends out a newsletter to update parents on recent program plans and events. Parent workshops and support groups are also sponsored in order to facilitate communication between parents and the program. Finally, *FWEP* hosts parent/child social activities such as holiday parties.

With an eye for prevention and mediation, *FWEP* staff provides home visits to help address domestic problems or to resolve specific incidents. Through these visits, staff offer individual counseling and parent conferences to open the lines of communication between family members. Parents have an opportunity to learn of their son's progress in school and in *FWEP*. In turn, if the home visitor discovers significant problems in the home, the schools are made aware of the situation. If staff detect more serious conflicts, the family is referred to a clinical psychologist who works on contract with *FWEP*.

Funding

FWEP costs about \$450,000 dollars to run per year. Fifty percent of *FWEP*'s funds come from private foundations such as the Hogg Foundation, the Powell Foundation, the Farrish Foundation, and the Houston Endowment Foundation. *FWEP* also receives government funding through a Community Block Grant and a Texas State Criminal Justice Division grant. In addition, *FWEP* is a United Way agency, and the program receives small donations from individuals and organizations, such as sporting equipment and the use of recreational facilities.

Staff

FWEP employs twelve full-time staff, twelve part-time staff, and four contract workers. Staff positions include an executive director, five project managers, a lead manager, a program manager, a business manager, an office manager, a parent liaison, a parent group facilitator, teen enterprise coordinators, peer educators, a violence prevention coordinator, and an outreach coordinator. In addition, the program has 120 volunteers per year who function as mentors, guest speakers, career shadow participants, and office support staff. Those volunteers who serve as mentors are specially trained. Of the paid staff, 26 of the 30 are male and the majority are African-American. McMillan believes that the staff's reflection of the participants' ethnicities and gender creates a supportive environment of mentoring and role modeling.

Barriers

FWEP had to overcome several obstacles in its early years of operation. The Fifth Ward itself was characterized by a great deal of community fragmentation. McMillan says that the community's youth were generally apathetic due to feelings that their life situations could not be improved. By sparking the interest of community leaders and members, *FWEP* was able to reach a consensus with the community that the Fifth Ward's young people needed special guidance in moving in a positive direction and that *FWEP* could aid in this process.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Listen to the youth and allow them to express their program needs.** McMillan believes that one of *FWEP*'s most successful attributes is that the staff has always taken the participants' needs seriously and has developed the program accordingly. Male youth have been empowered within the community because their opinions and needs are seen as important.